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SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 17th MEETING

Chairman: Mr. SENGWE (Zimbabwe)

Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions: Mr. MSELLE

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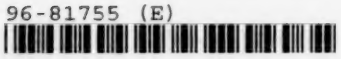

The meeting was called to order at 3.10 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 129: FINANCING OF THE UNITED NATIONS PROTECTION FORCE, THE UNITED NATIONS CONFIDENCE RESTORATION OPERATION IN CROATIA, THE UNITED NATIONS PREVENTIVE DEPLOYMENT FORCE AND THE UNITED NATIONS PEACE FORCES HEADQUARTERS (continued)

Draft resolutions A/C.5/51/L.7 and A/C.5/51/L.8

1. Mr. ABELIAN (Armenia) introduced draft resolutions A/C.5/51/L.7 and A/C.5/51/L.8 and recommended that they be adopted without a vote.

2. Draft resolutions A/C.5/51/L.7 and A/C.5/51/L.8 were adopted.

AGENDA ITEM 134: FINANCING OF THE UNITED NATIONS MISSION IN HAITI (continued)

Draft resolution A/C.5/51/L.5

3. Ms. PEÑA (Mexico) introduced draft resolution A/C.5/51/L.5 and recommended its adoption without a vote.

4. Draft resolution A/C.5/51/L.5 was adopted.

AGENDA ITEM 157: FINANCING OF THE UNITED NATIONS SUPPORT MISSION IN HAITI (continued)

Draft resolution A/C.5/51/L.6

5. Ms. PEÑA (Mexico) introduced draft resolution A/C.5/51/L.6 and recommended its adoption without a vote.

6. Draft resolution A/C.5/51/L.6 was adopted.

AGENDA ITEM 116: PROGRAMME BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM 1996-1997 (continued) (A/C.50/57 and Add.1, A/50/7/Add.16 and A/51/7/Add.1)

7. Mr. HANSON (Canada), speaking also on behalf of Australia and New Zealand, commended the Secretary-General and his collaborators for their efforts to implement the directive contained in General Assembly resolution 50/214 to achieve savings totalling $US 154 million without affecting the full implementation of mandated programmes and activities. That was not the first time that the General Assembly had prescribed such potentially contradictory goals. In its resolution 41/213 of 1986, the Assembly had approved a recommendation of the Group of 18 requiring the Secretary-General to reduce the overall number of regular budget posts by 15 per cent within a period of three years and in such a way as to avoid negative impact on programmes. That goal, which entailed the abolition of posts, had been largely achieved to the Assembly's satisfaction.

8. One of the reasons why the Secretary-General had been able to respond so quickly to resolution 50/214 was that the resolution called for partial

achievement of the savings through management of the vacancy rate and not through the abolition of posts. The question of the future of the posts vacated during the current biennium would be addressed in the context of the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1998-1999.

9. The authorized vacancy rate for both Professional and General Service posts did not constitute a maximum which could not be exceeded, in the same way that the staffing table was stipulated by the Assembly. The vacancy rate was a personnel management tool and was best viewed as an average target to be achieved over the period to which it applied.

10. The Secretary-General had moved to identify savings which fell within the purview conferred on him by the Charter. Resolutions 50/214 and 50/230 did not limit his authority, since they did not amend the Charter. There were some who took the view that the Secretary-General was forbidden to do anything which he was not mandated to do and, on the contrary, he must do everything which he was mandated to do and that there was no room in between for any discretion or exercise of initiative. The countries on whose behalf he spoke did not share that view. The Secretary-General had a free hand within the framework of the Charter authority and the Financial Regulations and Rules and the Staff Regulations and Rules to manage the Secretariat and to implement such savings as he considered appropriate. Increasingly, the Organization would have to move towards more delegated management practices as had been the case in many national civil services.

11. Had the Secretary-General not acted quickly, the Fifth Committee would have been forced to decide on a far more drastic reduction in posts in 1997 or to contemplate a substantial increase in the biennial appropriation and a retrospective increase in regular budget assessments for 1996. It should be pointed out that the proposed savings were being achieved without the involuntary separation of a single staff member and with the redeployment of only 58 staff members, or 6.2 per cent of the total number of 933 staff affected by the increased vacancy rate. Few national civil services could match that degree of institutional flexibility and concern for the needs of staff members.

12. He also applauded the Secretary-General's initiative in establishing an Efficiency Board and in taking action to implement savings and to realize the efficiency gains identified by the Board and the departments. Australia, Canada and New Zealand had supported the work of the Board and the Secretariat and were glad to see that positive results were already being recorded. They agreed with the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ) that the primary purpose of the efficiency reviews should be the efficient long-term operation of the Organization rather than the short-term goal of cost-cutting. Consideration should be given to ensuring that such reviews became an ongoing feature of the Organization's management. It went without saying that any economies which adversely affected the delivery of mandated programme objectives would require action by the General Assembly. He therefore agreed with the Advisory Committee's recommendation that the Secretary-General should update his estimates in the context of the first performance report.

13. The concern of some Member States that reductions in expenditure relating to posts and other staff costs might have accounted for a disproportionate share

of the savings was groundless. Such costs, which constituted over 75 per cent of the budget, accounted for less than 75 per cent of the savings, while reductions in consultancy and contractual services had accounted for a greater proportion of the savings than their relative share of the budget.

14. It would have been preferable for the Secretary-General to have achieved a greater proportion of the savings through reductions in expenditure on administration and management, which would have left more resources available for programme implementation. For example, the Secretary-General had proposed savings of 4.7 per cent for the Department of Administration and Management when the overall average reduction for all sections of the budget was 5.5 per cent. There was, therefore, scope for further reductions in administrative activities.

15. The savings proposals should have been presented in a more transparent manner. He was grateful to the Advisory Committee for the valuable supplementary information contained in the annexes to its two reports. The Secretary-General should have provided that information at the beginning of the debate and included a summary table showing the effects of the reductions on the entire budget, by section and object of expenditure.

16. In May 1996, the delegations of Australia, Canada and New Zealand had encouraged the Secretary-General to formulate programmatic proposals for the General Assembly to consider with a view to discontinuing or modifying outmoded programmes and activities, or reordering priorities so as to better reflect the changing situation in the world. The estimated funding requirement for new mandates had fallen from $120 million to $90 million, a drop of 23 per cent. The Secretary-General appeared to assume that such expenditure could be absorbed in 1996 and had offered no strategy for covering it in 1997.

17. Achieving budgetary savings required the cooperation and active contribution of intergovernmental bodies and the Secretariat. He agreed with the Advisory Committee's view in paragraph 40 of its report (A/50/7/Add.16) that the relevant intergovernmental bodies should review the programme of work. No organization could go on delivering the same programmes year after year without regard for the changing priorities of those it served. It was incumbent on the Member States to give the Secretary-General the guidance that he had so often requested. Delegations must negotiate such a process in good faith, even if it meant compromising on the priority of some programmes and activities which they considered very important. But such a process would lead to a stronger United Nations which was more relevant to the needs of all the world's peoples. As a start, the General Assembly should invite those intergovernmental bodies which had not already done so to undertake a thorough review of their work.

18. Mr. PHANIT (Thailand) said that his delegation supported the statement made by the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, and wished to reiterate its belief that the budgetary process of the United Nations should continue to be governed by the provisions of General Assembly resolution 41/213 of 19 December 1986.

19. The procedure followed in consideration and adoption of the 1996-1997 programme budget had not been consistent with past practice. Instead of adopting a reasonable and adequate budget to cover all mandated programmes, as

it had done previously, the General Assembly had first considered the amount to be appropriated. That situation had resulted from the capping of the budget approved in General Assembly resolution 50/214. The challenge now was for the General Assembly to accept that reductions of that magnitude could not be achieved without affecting programme delivery.

20. Member States should not continue to call upon the Secretary-General to fulfil all the provisions of resolution 50/214, which was clearly impossible. A review of the programme of work was inevitable. However, any review of mandated programmes with a view to eliminating some of them must be undertaken by the intergovernmental bodies concerned. It was not an "executive decision" by the Secretary-General. Therefore, his delegation, like other delegations, believed that more information was needed on whether or not the proposed changes outlined in the Secretary-General's report (A/C.5/50/57 and Add.1) were the consequence of an executive decision by the Secretary-General or the result of a legislative decision by the General Assembly. A similar view had been expressed by the Advisory Committee in its report (A/50/7/Add.16).

21. Thailand was concerned that financial cuts were affecting the implementation of some programmes and projects which were of importance to developing countries. It was particularly concerned about their impact on the work of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), which provided a useful forum for discussions on trade-related issues and whose studies provided valuable inputs and recommendations for the integration of the economies of developing countries into the world economy.

22. His delegation was also concerned about the impact of the budgetary reductions on the work of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), most of whose priority areas of action would be adversely affected. His delegation supported the comments made by the delegations of Indonesia and the Philippines concerning the importance of ESCAP programmes in promoting regional development and overcoming disparities in levels of economic development. Thailand was also concerned about the high vacancy rate resulting from the budget cuts, especially the 11.8 per cent vacancy rate for the Professional category, which could have a substantial impact on the delivery of mandated programmes.

23. His delegation was not averse to efficiency reviews in the Secretariat, although it agreed with the Advisory Committee that the primary purpose of the efficiency reviews should be geared more towards the efficient long-term operation of the Organization's activities than to the short-term goal of cost-cutting. In that regard his delegation was following with interest the work of the Efficiency Board, although it agreed with the Advisory Committee that it would not be advisable to establish yet another layer of bureaucracy to deal with the matter. Moreover, while it was necessary to achieve cost-effectiveness and efficiency gains, it must be ensured that there were sufficient resources to cover all mandates entrusted to the Organization under the medium-term plan.

24. Lastly, his delegation wished to stress that any reductions aimed at improving the efficiency of the United Nations or at streamlining its work should take into account the long-term objectives of the Organization and of the international community. The principles and purposes that had led to the

establishment of the United Nations should not be undermined. The Organization could only be as effective as its Member States allowed it to be by providing it with the necessary resources. Thailand, for its part, would continue to bear its share of responsibility and honour its financial obligations under the Charter in full.

25. Mr. MAPURANGA (Zimbabwe) endorsed the statement made on the agenda item before the Committee by the delegation of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. While the General Assembly, in resolution 50/214, had requested the Secretary-General to submit to it proposals for possible savings, it had also decided that savings would not affect the full implementation of mandated programmes and activities, and had requested the Secretary-General, in making proposals for savings, to ensure the fair, equitable and non-selective treatment of all budget sections. Notwithstanding the discretionary powers of the Secretary-General mentioned by the Canadian delegation, the inclusion of those provisos had persuaded his delegation and others to accept that resolution. He therefore hoped that, before the ideas of the Secretary-General were implemented, they would be considered and approved by the Member States in the General Assembly. Similarly, he expected that the Secretariat's interpretation of the rules and regulations would not be in conflict with the essence of the resolutions of the General Assembly.

26. It was essential to safeguard the supreme authority of the General Assembly by ensuring that its priorities were honoured and respected, and its mandated programmes and activities were carried out satisfactorily and within the specified mandate periods. His delegation was therefore concerned by the Secretary-General's comment in his programme performance report (A/51/128) that there had been a decline in the implementation rate in the biennium 1994-1995 and that it had not been possible to ensure implementation of high-priority outputs. His delegation also noted the concern voiced by the Committee for Programme and Coordination (CPC) in its report (A/51/16 (Part I)).

27. He wondered whether it was prudent to reduce both financial and human resources in a rather haphazard but certainly drastic way while claiming that current levels of output could be achieved with fewer resources, when in fact the Organization's track record showed that it had been unable to attain output targets with higher levels of inputs even in the case of priority programmes. His delegation also doubted whether Member States should accept massive staff reductions and opt for temporary assistance, consultancies and the outsourcing of services without studying the financial and programmatic impact of such measures beforehand. He wondered whether it would be possible to maintain equitable geographical distribution in those categories of services, and asked whether there was a danger of losing institutional memory in certain important functions unique to the programmes and activities of the United Nations.

28. Such concerns would need to be adequately addressed before the Secretary-General's proposals could be approved. His delegation fully agreed with ACABQ that the Secretary-General should not carry out any involuntary separations solely to achieve budgetary savings, bearing in mind that the General Assembly had not decided to abolish established posts and had still not considered the proposals of the Secretary-General on budget reduction. In the

meantime he urged the Secretary-General to continue searching for savings in non-staff sectors without prejudice to programme delivery.

29. His delegation was concerned about the postponement of programmes and activities in the economic and social sectors and the fact that many of those activities had been starved of funds. Without information on the nature and net programmatic impact of the numerous delays, deferments and cancellations that could result from the proposed cost-saving measures, it would not be possible to take action on the Secretary-General's report (A/C.5/50/57 and Add.1). In that regard, his delegation eagerly awaited the Secretariat's responses to the questions raised by the delegation of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. The changes which needed to be made to the Organization should not diminish its ability to carry out the mandates established by the General Assembly.

30. Mr. TAKASU (Controller) thanked the delegations which had acknowledged the difficult task facing the Secretary-General and the Secretariat. In response to the questions which had been asked, he said that the basic dilemma, which had also been referred to by ACABQ (A/51/7/Add.1, para. 5), was that Member States had valued the programmes and activities mandated for 1996-1997 at $2,760 million but had approved a budget level of only $2,600 million while expecting the Secretary-General to fully implement all mandated programmes, which was impossible unless the programme of work was changed.

31. The work programmes of departments and offices reflected in the programme budget had been established by programme managers to achieve the objectives of mandated programmes. In some cases, mandated programmes were explicitly and specifically regulated by resolutions. In others, mandated programmes had a general orientation and general objectives which Member States expected the Secretary-General to pursue, giving him discretion as to how to implement the mandate. Within those parameters, modifications to the work programme, rather than to mandates, had been proposed. The identification of modifications to the work programme required the involvement of all programme managers on the basis of programmatic analysis by each of them, thereby reflecting their understanding of the necessity to implement mandates in a less costly manner, and taking into account the characteristics of mandates and activities. It had been necessary to reorientate and reorganize the work programme, although no staff member had been given responsibility in a field in which he lacked expertise, and great care had been taken to ensure that activities deriving explicitly from a legislative mandate were not affected.

32. Since the adoption of resolution 50/214 at the end of 1995, it had not been possible to hold consultations with intergovernmental bodies. Nevertheless, to the extent possible, and taking into account the schedule or biennial cycle of intergovernmental meetings, efforts had been made to consult with those bodies and draw their attention to the proposed changes to the work programme.

33. Part II of document A/C.5/50/57/Add.1 listed the proposed reductions in a format similar to that of the budget. The list indicated which activities, outputs or services would be delayed, curtailed, cancelled or postponed. The delayed activities would take longer to deliver but would be implemented in the course of the biennium; the curtailed activities would be implemented with

reduced capacity; the cancelled activities would not be implemented; and the postponed activities would be implemented at a later date in the current or a subsequent biennium, which would have to be borne in mind by programme managers when formulating their corresponding budget proposals.

34. In March, 73 per cent of the budget had related to staff costs. Of the proposed reduction of $154.1 million, $99.3 million related to staff costs. Although some delegations had stated that the Secretary-General should have sought more savings in non-staff costs, it could be seen that the savings proposed were considerable and if efforts had been made to cut general operating costs even further, the operations of the Organization would have been severely hampered. Programme managers had been given the flexibility to determine how to achieve reductions in their staff and non-staff costs. The Secretariat believed that the ratio of 64 per cent staff costs to 34 per cent non-staff costs was a fair balance.

35. In order to achieve total savings of $154 million as stipulated by General Assembly resolution 50/214, programme managers had been asked to bear in mind when formulating their proposals that the vacancy rate for both the Professional and General Service categories should be at least 6.4 per cent. It should be pointed out that, in order to reach that figure, the vacancy rate must be higher during the current biennium. On the basis of the proposals submitted, it had been concluded that the overall average vacancy rate for the current biennium should be in excess of 9 per cent for the Professional category and over 7 per cent for the General Service category. It was extremely difficult to predict the overall level of vacancies that would be realized for the biennium as a whole, since the rate depended on a series of factors, only some of which were under the direct control of the Secretary-General and programme managers.

36. It was important to remember that the vacancy rate was calculated at the end of each month and the fact that a post was vacant did not mean that it would be abolished, that it would not be encumbered in the future or that it would be frozen throughout the biennium. It was quite clear that the Secretary-General could not abolish posts without the approval of the General Assembly. In any case, since the vacancy rate varied from one month to another, the best way of analysing its impact was to consider the average rate over the biennium. In addition, the vacancy rate varied considerably at different duty stations and in different departments; the figures provided were of a general nature.

37. Programme managers had identified the number of staff exceeding the level of staff costs necessary to achieve a minimum vacancy rate of 6.4 per cent. After consideration of programmatic and financial implications, those staff were encouraged to apply for vacancies available in other departments or offices which had already achieved the required savings. As indicated in administrative instruction ST/AI/415, which set forth the criteria for redeployment and separation, staff members who could not be placed in other offices might have to be separated from service, although the Administration was exerting maximum efforts to avoid that outcome.

38. In that connection, some delegations had stated that since the United Nations as a whole had achieved higher than anticipated level of vacancies, there was no longer a need to separate staff. Nevertheless, it must be

emphasized that the average vacancy rate between January and September 1996 was higher than anticipated in the Professional category (11.1 per cent), while the vacancy rate for the General Service was still below the required 5.8 per cent. Since in some offices the vacancy rate was well below the minimum required 6.4 per cent, to maintain that there was no longer a need to separate staff would be tantamount to treating such variances between departments as permanent factors, thereby punishing programmes which, for a variety of reasons, happened to have high vacancy rates. It should be noted that the General Assembly had requested the Secretary-General, when making proposals intended to achieve savings, to ensure that fair, equitable and non-selective treatment would be applied to all sections of the budget.

39. Moreover, it was necessary to gain further experience before submitting proposals on possible means of absorbing new mandates. Such proposals would be submitted in the context of the first performance report.

40. It should be recalled that in March 1996, when the General Assembly discussed the possibility of renewing the mandates of the International Civilian Mission in Haiti (MICIVIH) and the United Nations Mission for the Verification of Human Rights and Compliance with the Commitments of the Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights in Guatemala (MINUGUA), the Secretary-General had submitted statements of programme budget implications in which he had indicated that it would be impossible to absorb the additional expenditures unless the General Assembly decided which existing programmes should be curtailed, postponed or terminated. Despite that position, the General Assembly had adopted resolutions extending the mandates of those missions, to be implemented "within existing resources". (That phrase was usually employed when the amounts in question were small; however, in the case of the missions referred to, it was a matter of many millions of dollars.) At the same time, the General Assembly, in its resolutions 50/231 and 50/232, had requested the Secretary-General to submit proposals on possible means of absorption in the programme budget. Possibilities of absorption depended on many factors, such as actual expenditures for those new mandates and existing programmes, as well as variations in the rates of exchange and inflation. Although currently there was no indication of excessive spending because of the new mandates, that was due to many factors, including a slightly higher than anticipated vacancy rate resulting from unexpected high vacancies in some programmes outside of New York, a stronger dollar in relation to the Swiss franc and other currencies and other elements that should be factored into the preparation of the performance report.

41. General Assembly resolutions 50/214 and 50/231 contained contradictory and incompatible expectations: both current and new activities must be implemented without additional appropriations; the programme budget should be reduced from $2.76 billion to $2.6 billion without affecting the full implementation of mandated programmes; additional mandates of an unforeseen nature must be implemented within existing resources, and the Secretary-General should submit proposals on possible means of absorption. Yet, in the preambular paragraphs of every single resolution, the General Assembly reaffirmed resolution 41/213 and subsequent related resolutions.

42. The budgetary process had proceeded in a disorderly fashion. After the initial programme budget for the biennium 1996-1997 had been approved, programme

managers had been required to make adjustments, reorganize their work and reassign staff. Traditionally, the budget had been prepared every two years and unforeseen activities had been dealt with according to established procedures. While the Secretariat understood the political reality, it was important for Member States to realize the significance and impact of their decisions on the orderly operation of the Organization and its budgetary process. The current disruptions had diverted attention from pressing substantive issues. If it was to be able to resolve the dilemma it was facing, the Secretariat would need the support and understanding of all Member States.

43. Mr. CONNOR (Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management) offered five observations concerning the proposed programme budget for the biennium 1996-1997. First, delegations had the responsibility of accepting or rejecting, in whole or in part, the $2.6 billion budget currently before them. Certain activities had been curtailed, delayed or eliminated, and no effort had been made to hide that fact. In other circumstances and at other times, Member States had understood and accepted similar curtailments, delays and eliminations. It would be unrealistic to believe that the Secretariat could respond to the decisions of Member States to reduce appropriations without making some changes in the long list of what had been described by one delegation as activities. The Secretariat had made some hard choices, but it had tried conscientiously to leave in place the core of the mandates voted by Member States. It was currently for them to decide.

44. Secondly, it was not possible to achieve a downsizing of $154 million without a corresponding downsizing of personnel, at least not when over 70 per cent of the cost structure of the Organization consisted in staff costs. Building maintenance had been cut to the bone, travel and consultancy costs had been restricted for more than a year; no easy choices remained. Member States had decided the amount of the budget to be appropriated, which had inevitable consequences. The Secretariat had been guided carefully by the rules and regulations of the Organization. It had never been easy to take decisions affecting people. Many Governments had been obliged to accept similar situations in their countries; the United Nations was not an isolated case. It should be noted that every termination to date had been voluntary.

45. Thirdly, increased efficiency was a positive element. The Secretariat had tried to cushion the effect of curtailments, delays and eliminations of programmes by working harder and smarter. None of the efficiency measures were destructive - quite the contrary. In the budget documents, a long list of efficiencies was set forth: reports were compressed, meetings consolidated, processes improved, technology expanded, all with the purpose of performing the mandated tasks better and at lower cost.

46. Fourthly, the Secretariat was trying to follow the direction given by Member States in absorbing new mandates within existing resources. There had been no suggestions for reductions in programmes or activities which had outlived their usefulness. The Secretariat was coping with its increased workload with the same staff. That was what was meant by absorbing new mandates "within existing resources". No attempt was being made to absorb the workload within diminished resources, or to reduce the latter below that which had been appropriated. It was true that 900 vacancies existed in established posts, but

the regular budget was absorbing the cost of over 300 temporary posts, on a short-term basis, for the International Civilian Mission in Haiti (MICIVIH) and the United Nations Mission for the Verification of Human Rights and of Compliance with the Commitments of the Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights in Guatemala (MINUGUA); the Secretariat had not expected to have to support those missions, but was continuing to do so because Member States had extended their mandates.

47. One factor which had helped in absorbing the cost of new mandates had been the rise of the United States dollar relative to the Swiss franc. That would be discussed again in the first performance report, when the absorption of costs would be considered further.

48. Mr. TAKASU (Controller), responding to the requests from the representatives of Canada, Costa Rica and Mexico, said that he would provide his remarks in writing and that the information requested by the Group of 77 and China would be presented in table form at a later meeting.

49. Ms. BUERGO RODRÍGUEZ (Cuba) asked the Chairman to consider allowing the replies and comments of Member States regarding the statements by the Under-Secretary-General for Administration and Management and by the Controller to be presented in a formal meeting.

AGENDA ITEM 118: PATTERN OF CONFERENCES (continued) (A/51/32, A/51/253, A/51/268 and Corr.1, A/51/337 and A/51/125)

50. Mr. Bong Hyun KIM (Republic of Korea) noted that, according to the information presented by the Assistant Secretary-General for Conference and Support Services, the staffing resources of conference services had been cut by approximately 20 per cent, entailing the loss of 291 positions, despite the considerable increase in demand. His delegation considered that the disparity between the demand for conference services and the capacity to meet that demand arose partly from the dilemma raised in the Secretary-General's report (A/C.5/50/57/Add.1): how to impose budget cuts and at the same time implement all mandated programmes and activities. The efficiency gains and technological advances referred to by the Assistant Secretary-General could not close the widening gap between capacity and demand for conference services. His delegation was concerned that that might lead to a deterioration in the quality of conference services. He noted the radical change in operating assumptions implicit in the remark of the representative of China in the discussion on agenda item 116, who had said that the establishment of an arbitrary budget ceiling could in no way be conducive to the full implementation of United Nations programmes and activities.

51. Despite the limits mentioned in General Assembly resolution 50/214, a realistic way must be found to resolve the problem of increasing demand for conference services and the shrinking capacity of those services. In that connection, he urged the Secretariat to do its utmost to achieve greater efficiency in conference services management by introducing improvements such as the use of the Internet and the optical disk system, and to highlight the importance of the cooperation of Member States in achieving a better balance between the demand for conference services and their capacity.

52. He noted with deep concern the statistics presented in paragraph 44 of the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/51/32), according to which the cost of producing one page of documentation in the six official languages in the previous year had been $916, of which $602 represented the cost of translation. That paragraph also stated that the cost of one meeting was $4,533, of which $4,194 represented the cost of interpretation. In the light of the Organization's current budget difficulties, Member States and the Secretariat should cooperate to limit the quantity of documents produced and to find a way to cut the costs of meetings.

53. The report of the Committee on Conferences also noted that the delay in beginning certain meetings entailed considerable additional expenditure; his delegation welcomed the new practice of beginning meetings on time, and hoped that that practice would continue and be adopted also in informal meetings.

54. His delegation shared the concern of the Committee on Conferences that the overall average utilization of the core sample of bodies included in document A/AC.172/1996/3 was below 80 per cent. In that connection, he supported the Committee's request, made in document A/51/32, that its Chairman should consult with the chairmen of bodies which had utilized less than the applicable benchmark figure in respect of their allocated resources over the past three sessions, with a view to making appropriate recommendations to achieve optimum utilization of conference-servicing resources.

55. Finally, his delegation joined the Group of 77 and China, the European Union, the United States, Japan, the Russian Federation and other delegations in expressing its concern that recordings of informal meetings had often been made without the prior approval of the Member States concerned. He hoped that the Secretariat would provide an explanation, and take the necessary measures to prevent it from happening again.

56. Ms. BUERGO RODRÍGUEZ (Cuba) took advantage of the presence of the Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management to point out that, as a matter of form, she would prefer that Cuba should not be dissociated from the Group of 77, as he had done on more than one occasion in presenting some of his replies to questions from Member States. In future, she would be grateful if the Secretariat would bear in mind the composition of the various groups of countries in replying to questions from delegations, and structure its replies in such a way as to avoid giving rise to tendentious interpretations.

57. Concerning agenda item 118, she supported the statement made by Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. Conference services played a vital part in the work of the Organization, and to do without them or reduce the resources allocated for that purpose in order to make savings would have extremely detrimental consequences. Rapid progress in negotiations which took place at the United Nations would also depend on the quality, timeliness and efficiency with which conference services were provided. Her delegation considered that it was essential to scrutinize very carefully proposals for savings in that area. The budget cuts provided for in resolution 50/214 were provisional and did not take the future into account. It remained to be shown that the measures proposed by the Secretariat would lead to greater efficiency and at the same

time compensate for negative consequences in the activities of Conference Services.

58. The principle of universality of the United Nations should also be borne in mind in the activities of Conference Services. Her delegation could not permit budget cuts to lead to a violation of the spirit and letter of resolution 50/11 and lead the Organization towards monolingualism, which Cuba would not accept even if Spanish were to be the dominant language.

59. Cuba had carefully studied the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/51/32) and felt that the recommendations made in it could serve as a good basis for the decisions of the General Assembly. Her delegation also supported the recommendations made in paragraphs 20, 23, 24 and 25 of that report. With regard to the calendar submitted for the approval of Member States, Cuba wished to know why it did not include the Caribbean regional seminar of the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, and why no provision had been made for Conference Services for the seminar, as indicated in paragraph 17 of the report. In relation to paragraph 21, Cuba asked whether it involved any change in current practice, and what the consequences would be for the meetings of the bodies which were granted waivers. It also asked what the situation would be if the Committee on Conferences did not make a specific recommendation. Until a reply was given to those questions, it would not be possible to take a position on that recommendation.

60. With regard to the utilization of conference-servicing resources, her delegation shared the concern expressed by the Committee on Conferences in paragraph 30 of its report about the fact that the overall and average utilization factors of those services were below 80 per cent. In that respect, it encouraged the Committee on Conferences and the secretariat of the Office of Conference and Support Services to maintain an active dialogue with the chairmen and secretariats, as applicable, of the intergovernmental bodies whose utilization factors were below the benchmark figure. Her delegation would support the recommendations made in paragraphs 45, 47 and 49. On that subject, Cuba wished to know whether the core sample had included the Security Council, since as it had already pointed out on another occasion, the Security Council's working methods and procedures involved an inefficient use of Conference Services.

61. It was generally recognized that the provision of Conference Services to meetings of regional and other major groupings of Member States facilitated the decision-making process in intergovernmental bodies. Cuba shared the concern expressed by the Committee on Conferences in paragraph 57 of its report about the fact that 35 per cent of requests for interpretation services for such meetings had been denied. In that respect, her delegation supported the recommendation made in paragraph 58 of that report, although it would be only a palliative to the current situation and was not a real solution to the problem. Cuba was aware that the solution was basically in the hands of Member States, and proposed that the issue should be taken up again in the context of the negotiations on the programme budget.

62. Cuba took note of paragraphs 64 and 65 of the report of the Committee on Conferences concerning the cost-accounting system for Conference Services and would await with interest the full report which the Secretariat was to submit on the subject, and the related report of the Advisory Committee. In that respect, however, it wished to stress General Assembly resolution 43/222 B, which made it clear that the Committee on Conferences had no competence in budgetary matters.

63. As to the control and limitation of documentation, Cuba took note of the results of the use of unedited verbatim transcripts in the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space, but felt that no hasty final conclusions should be drawn before having all the necessary information to justify their use. In that respect, it supported the recommendation in paragraph 88 of the report of the Committee on Conferences. As to the use of new technologies for access to United Nations documentation, Cuba felt that, although those technologies could help reduce the volume of published documents, they should continue to be an additional service and not an artificial solution to the problem of the lack of resources available to Conference Services to implement mandates. Attempts to establish that mechanism as the only access to documentation for Member States would amount to transferring to them the printing costs incurred by the Secretariat.

64. With regard to the United Nations publications policy, Cuba awaited with great interest the report to be submitted on the subject by the Joint Inspection Unit. It hoped that at the current session the General Assembly would finally be able to make an in-depth analysis of document A/C.5/48/10.

65. Her delegation was astonished that the Secretariat had recorded informal consultations. In that respect, it agreed with other speakers that that practice impeded dialogue and undermined confidence between delegations and the Secretariat. It would await with interest the replies to that question.

66. Mr. ELZIMAITY (Egypt) said that his delegation endorsed the comments made by the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China and reaffirmed the importance of multilingualism in the United Nations. The new technologies should be applied with respect for equality between all the official languages.

67. His delegation welcomed the recommendations by the Committee on Conferences in paragraph 20 of its report (A/51/32) and stressed the importance of institutionalizing the practice of not holding meetings of United Nations bodies on the Islamic festivals of Id al-Fitr (which falls at the end of Ramadan) and Id al-Adha (the Feast of Sacrifice).

68. His delegation welcomed with satisfaction the measures taken to improve the quality of translations and hoped that the Arabic Translation Service would spare no effort to implement Egypt's proposals to improve the standard of Arabic in the United Nations. An annual report should be submitted to the Committee on Conferences regarding progress made in that respect, and the measures taken to coordinate the terminological work of the Arabic Translation Service with the delegations of the Arab countries. As to the possible experimental use of unedited verbatim transcripts of meetings of United Nations bodies, it would be necessary to continue to provide the usual records in addition to transcripts.

69. Egypt awaited with interest the Secretariat's plan to connect all the missions of Member States in New York, Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi to the optical disk system, as envisaged by the General Assembly in paragraph 3 of resolution 50/206 D. It would be necessary to continue to provide printed documents until all the developing countries had access to the new technology and all the documents were available electronically in the six official languages.

70. He shared the concern expressed by previous speakers about the use of sound recordings in informal consultations, especially in cases in which such recordings had been used to question the actions of staff members.

71. Mr. ALSOSWA (Yemen), supported by Mr. GAZZAZ (Saudi Arabia), said that he endorsed the comments made by the representative of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, and stressed the importance of respecting the equality of the six official languages and improving the quality of translations, especially into Arabic. He supported the use of new technologies but felt that until all the developing countries had access to them, documents would still have to be published in printed form. Assistance should be provided to the developing countries to enable them to use those new technologies.

72. The Secretariat should ensure that no meetings of United Nations bodies were held on the Islamic festivals of Id al-Fitr and Id al-Adha, as recommended by the Committee on Conferences in paragraph 20 of its report.

73. Mr. SULAIMAN (Syrian Arab Republic) said that his delegation endorsed the statement made by the delegation of Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China. He appreciated the difficulties which the Secretariat faced in providing conference services at a time of financial crisis and despite the increase in the number of meetings. Nevertheless, the multilingualism of the Organization should not be affected, since it offered all peoples the opportunity to express their opinions in the six official languages and gave the United Nations its international character.

74. He noted the reduction of conference services in the six official languages for meetings of regional groups. In that connection, he drew attention to paragraphs 53 and 58 of the report of the Committee on Conferences (A/51/32) and called for the recommendations contained therein to be implemented. While his delegation acknowledged the great effort being made by conference service staff in the different areas, it also pointed out, particularly with respect to summary records and press releases, that it was necessary to check the original statements of representatives before such documents were issued. It had been observed that press releases were often based on translations into English.

75. The delegation of the Syrian Arab Republic considered the introduction of new technologies to be very important and hoped that they would be introduced in all languages alike, especially in Arabic. The use of the optical disk system and the Internet, however, should not constitute an alternative to traditional documents, as indicated in paragraph 95 of the report of the Committee on Conferences. His delegation also agreed with paragraph 96 of that report, which dealt with facilitating access by developing countries to the optical disk

system in all official languages, in accordance with paragraph 3 of General Assembly resolution 50/206 D, of 23 December 1995.

76. The Syrian Arab Republic attached great importance to improving the quality of translations into all languages, particularly Arabic, and therefore requested the Secretary-General to examine the expressions used in translations into Arabic. The literal translation of texts into Arabic should be avoided, mainly because the translated texts were later sent to the capitals of States where they were considered as important sources of information for the decision-making process. Two important elements must be borne in mind: ongoing refresher courses for translators and interpreters and the standardization of expressions, in other words, the use of agreed expressions aimed at achieving greater clarity.

77. The Syrian Arab Republic shared the concern of the Group of 77 and China over paragraph 124 of the report of the Committee on Conferences, namely, the fact that informal consultations had been recorded without the knowledge of Member States. Member States should be officially told which meetings had been recorded and at whose request. It was essential to maintain the spirit of mutual confidence which had always characterized the relationship between the Secretariat and Member States.

78. With regard to the calendar of conferences, the delegation of the Syrian Arab Republic supported the request contained in paragraph 20 of the Committee's report that no meetings should be held on Muslim holy days, since such days were very important for a considerable number of Member States, and that similar arrangements should be made when drafting the calendar of future conferences and meetings. Finally, he welcomed the General Assembly's decision to adhere to the schedule and not to hold night meetings in order to save resources.

79. Mr. ZAHID (Chairman of the Committee on Conferences) said that one of the abiding concerns of the Committee on Conferences was to ensure that high quality-conference services were provided and utilized as efficiently and effectively as possible. He was gratified that members of the Fifth Committee supported the activities of the Committee on Conferences and the course of action set forth in the conclusions and recommendations contained in the latter's report.

80. In view of the current financial constraints of the United Nations, he welcomed the spirit of cooperation and discipline demonstrated by the Secretariat and delegations alike. Member States could indeed play an important role in promoting the efficient utilization of conference services, particularly by ensuring that meetings began and ended on time. In fact, greater punctuality was already being witnessed in the plenary Assembly and in the Fifth Committee. He hoped that that trend would continue and spread throughout the Organization. He also trusted that the Secretariat and Member States would make further efforts to enhance their utilization of scarce conference resources.

81. He wished to assure members of the Committee that in future the dialogue and consultations about which so much had been said in the report of the Committee on Conferences and during the debate and which were so essential to the Committee's work would be maintained and strengthened. He wished to place

on record his deep gratitude to the staff of the Office of Conference and Support Services for their cooperation and support and, on behalf of the Committee on Conferences, to the members of the Fifth Committee for their interest in the Committee's work.

82. Mr. SEVAN (Assistant Secretary-General for Conference and Support Services), responding to the questions posed during the general debate, assured Member States that the Secretariat was fully committed to the principle of the equality of the six official languages of the Organization and of its two working languages.

83. Replying to the questions raised about the sound recording of informal consultations, the practice of the Main Committees had been as follows: the First Committee had never had sound recordings made of any of its informal consultations. However, during the fiftieth session, that Committee had requested full conference services, including sound recordings, for seven informal meetings devoted to a discussion of the thematic approach to agenda items dealing with disarmament and international security. The informal consultations which had been held by both the Third Committee and one of its working groups during the same session had taken place during a suspension of an official meeting or immediately after such a meeting. The sound recording had continued during the informal consultations at the request of the secretary of the Committee to ensure the accuracy of the secretariat's notes, which would be the basis for follow-up action. Because of their confidential nature, the tapes had neither been transcribed nor forwarded to anyone. Since no objections had been raised to that procedure, it had been assumed that it was not necessary to obtain any other clearance to record the meetings.

84. During the Assembly's fiftieth session, all informal consultations of the Fifth Committee with full conference services had been recorded automatically, in accordance with the established practice, which was considered useful for the substantive offices that assisted the Committee. In the case of the Sixth Committee, recordings had been requested of meetings of informal subsidiary groups established to consolidate proposals. The recordings served to ascertain the positions of delegations in cases of doubt.

85. It should be recalled in that connection that, the previous August, the Committee on Conferences had recommended that no audio recordings of the informal consultations of any intergovernmental body should be made unless that body decided otherwise. As soon as a decision had been made on that recommendation, all Committee secretariats had been advised accordingly and the rule had been followed since then.

86. He had taken note of the views expressed by Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China as well as by other delegations on the importance of providing adequate conference services to regional groups and other major groupings of Member States. He concurred with the statement by the representative of Bolivia on behalf of the Rio Group that the best way of addressing the issue was to plan for those meetings within the work programmes of intergovernmental bodies, as the Committee on Conferences had urged. However, it was the Member States and not the Secretariat which had the budgetary authority to decide on the appropriate level of conference services

that should be provided to such meetings and it was therefore for them to adopt a resolution by consensus and to provide the necessary resources. If Member States were convinced that the meetings of regional groups and informal consultations were of critical importance for the adoption of decisions in official meetings, then they should assume responsibility for the expenditures involved in providing the conferences services for such meetings and consultations. It should also be noted that during 1996 conference services had been provided to a greater number of bilateral meetings (751) than during the same period in 1995 (703).

87. Replying to questions raised by Costa Rica on behalf of the Group of 77 and China, he said that the five open-ended working groups of the General Assembly had held 219 meetings in 1996, at a notional cost of $985,500; the cost of the related documentation (995 pages) had been $911,420. As to the question raised by Ireland on behalf of the European Union, relating to the inclusion of the working groups' projected meetings in the calendar for 1997, an effort would be made to accommodate the groups' requirements, provided that their meetings did not overlap and that the members of the groups were flexible with regard to scheduling.

88. He shared the concern expressed by Jamaica and the Group of 77 that the budget reductions had delayed the execution of certain technological innovation projects. Even the technological improvements that had been made had rapidly become obsolete owing to the lack of funds for upgrading them. The delays had been due to the need to continue to provide the most essential services to intergovernmental and expert bodies. Nevertheless, ways were being found to move forward in those areas in which more advanced technology would bring immediate benefits in terms of service quality and productivity, provided that the necessary funds were available.

89. With regard to the question raised by the Russian Federation, the fact that some translators keyboarded their own texts had reduced the resources required for subsequent text-processing (13 posts in the text-processing units had been abolished or redeployed in 1996). Furthermore, the networking of the translators' workstations had provided them with faster and wider access to reference material and terminology databases. Lastly, the hardware that was being purchased would make it possible to move into machine-assisted translation. While the software for that function was still in the development stage, available packages were being tested in order to identify one that might be appropriate for the United Nations; such a step was expected to boost productivity. It should be recalled, however, that even in a computerized environment, human resources were still necessary, and that increasing efficiency would require investing in that area as well.

90. The Secretariat had succeeded in connecting the Internet with the optical disk system earlier than anticipated, so that all the official documents of the Organization could now be consulted on-line. Electronic access to documents would be much less expensive and more widespread, since some 120 Permanent and Observer Missions in New York had been connected to the Internet via the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) dial-in service. That did not mean that it would be possible to stop printing documents, since there was no substitute for printed documents. He wished to make it clear to some delegations that, while

the Secretariat did not have the resources to provide them with computers, it was prepared to assist in connecting them to the network and to organize training courses for members of the delegations.

91. The calendar of conferences and meetings for 1997 was being revised; at last count, 220 new meetings had been added to the programme approved in the previous year. That did not include the additional meetings that would be needed if the mandates of the five open-ended working groups were renewed. The Secretariat could not absorb new meetings without additional costs unless they could be scheduled at times when they would not overwhelm its projected capacity. Suggestions regarding possible dates for most of the new meetings had been developed and would be circulated to the Committee prior to informal consultations. Delegations should take all those factors into account and decide, for once, not to endeavour to please everyone, but to seek a solution which would displease everyone equally. The most difficult situations were those in which a proposal was made to hold a session of a new subsidiary body concurrently with that of the parent body; usually, that could not be done without additional costs.

92. There was also an increasing tendency to hold important meetings during the General Assembly, since delegations wished to take advantage of the presence of government ministers in New York. Unfortunately, that was a luxury of the past; however important such meetings might be, it was not possible to accommodate them, as there were not even any meeting rooms available.

93. With regard to the questions raised by Cuba and Egypt, some of the details requested would be provided in informal consultations. The regional seminar planned by the Special Committee on decolonization had not yet been included in the calendar because its venue and date had not yet been decided. In addition, the General Assembly had yet to approve the Special Committee's programme of work for 1997. The expectation that conference services would not be required for the seminar was based on the experience of the most recent seminar, at which such services had not been used. The question concerning paragraph 21 of the report of the Committee on Conferences should be addressed to the Committee, not to the Secretariat. Another question had been raised regarding the Security Council. The Security Council had not been included in the sample used to measure the rates of utilization of conference services, since the Council did not schedule its meetings in advance and met nearly every day. As for the question raised by Egypt, the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences had written to the Chairman of the United Nations Statistical Commission, and it was to be hoped that the issue would be resolved at that stage. The Secretariat had informed all the secretaries and chairmen of the committees concerned of the decision to avoid holding meetings during Muslim religious holidays.

94. Lastly, the comments made by the representative of Pakistan at a previous meeting did not relate to the agenda item under consideration; the representative of Pakistan had stated that at 1 p.m. and 6 p.m., the interpreters invariably reminded the delegations that it was time for the meeting to end. The interpreters had to do that when necessary, because if the body concerned intended to extend the meeting beyond the normal 20 minutes, the interpretation services needed to know that so that they could bring in a fresh team of interpreters. He did not believe, however, that the interpreters had

ever refused to remain at their posts for normal extensions of 15, 20 or even 30 minutes. In addition, the argument that the interpreters wished to leave was used by others who wanted the meetings to end on time but preferred not to say so openly.

95. The answer to the Pakistani representative's question as to whether the interpreters were the only ones at the United Nations who got tired was obviously no. Nevertheless, they were probably the only ones who worked under such stringent conditions: they spent six hours a day in their booths, and while they were working, they could not leave the meeting, leave early or talk with anyone. Their work also required a high level of concentration. Therefore, while they were not the only ones who got tired, they probably came out of a meeting more tired than anyone else.

96. He concurred fully with the Pakistani representative's statement that there was a need to examine the issue in greater depth; to do so would probably reveal that the conditions of service of interpreters in comparable organizations were much more favourable than in the Secretariat.

97. Ms. BUERGO RODRÍGUEZ (Cuba) said it was surprising that the seminar planned by the Special Committee on decolonization had not been included in the calendar of conferences; on other occasions when the venue and date of the meeting had not yet been determined, the calendar had indicated that the matter remained to be decided.

98. Mr. SULAIMAN (Syrian Arab Republic), supported by Mr. BOYNTON (United States of America), requested the Assistant Secretary-General for Conference and Support Services to provide the Committee with a written copy of his statement so that it could be considered in greater depth in informal consultations.

99. Mr. SIAL (Pakistan) said that while he agreed with the comments made by the Assistant Secretary-General for Conference and Support Services, the importance of meetings, should not be overlooked. He reserved the right to consider the matter at a later time.

The meeting rose at 6.20 p.m.